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Inside Information From Kremlin Hard To Come By in U.S.

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Lack of Intelligence Data Has Officials Speculating On Andropov's Successor

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WASHINGTON—Last Friday morning, as the world reacted to the death of Soviet leader Yuri Andropov, a cable arrived on the desks of senior U.S. officials from an American ambassador overseas. The cable knowingly predicted that Mr. Andropov would give up his post as Soviet head of state next month, but remain as Communist Party leader.

The ill-timed cable illustrates a basic intelligence-gathering problem for the U.S.: At a time when the Soviet Union is going through a crucial change of leadership, the U.S. knows almost nothing about decision-making within the Kremlin.

"You would be shocked at how little we know" about the Soviet Union, says a senior administration official who reads the daily flow of intelligence reports. "If we confessed our ignorance, we'd be better off."

The lack of intelligence information is so chronic that, according to one congressional source, the U.S. "had absolutely no idea" where the ailing Mr. Andropov was for more than four months. By one account, U.S. intelligence agencies went at least 152 days without being able to fix Mr. Andropov's location. Previously, since 1922, the longest the U.S. had ever been in the dark about a Soviet leader's whereabouts was 10 days, according to this source.

In the effort to locate Mr. Andropov, a U.S. Embassy officer in Moscow at one point stationed himself on a street corner near the Kremlin and tried to spot the Soviet leader's limousine. A motorcade eventually appeared, but the embassy man couldn't spot Mr. Andropov.

"If there is a weakness in our intelligence apparatus, it's in our ability to figure out what the leaders of the Soviet Union are going to do in any given situation," says Richard Helms, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency. He notes that in some cases, "we may not even divine for some time that a decision has been made, let alone the nature of it."

The U.S. is in the dark now, as the Soviets are struggling to choose a new leader, because of its inability to penetrate the tiny group of Soviet officials who are privy to major decisions. Malcolm Toon, former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, estimates that a maximum of 100 Soviet officials actually know what's going on—and they aren't talking.

Inevitably, this causes some serious U.S. miscalculations. Senior administration officials say they were convinced that Mr. Andropov would reappear in public last December at a scheduled meeting of the Supreme Soviet, partly because of Soviet leaks that seem, in retrospect, to have been disinformation.

To be sure, there have been some recent intelligence successes in evaluating the Soviets. Months ago, U.S. analysts correctly diagnosed that Mr. Andropov was suffering from a kidney failure, complicated by diabetes. "We knew he was going to die, but we didn't know when," says an influential U.S. official.

U.S. information about Mr. Andropov's health came partly from several American doctors who visited recently with Dr. Yevgeny Chazov, a top Soviet medical authority who treats members of the Politburo. U.S. officials also note reports that the American doctors who visited Dr. Chazov may have provided him with medical equipment to help treat Mr. Andropov.

A senior administration official notes one ironic benefit of the lack of inside information about Kremlin politics: Because the U.S. knows so little, it isn't tempted to try to play favorites among the Soviet leadership. The official argues that any such attempt to manipulate Soviet decisions would be "a snare and a delusion."

"Even if you owned a member of the Politburo, that wouldn't give you the whole story," explains another senior U.S. official. "You would have to own them all."